Narsai

(c. 399 – c. 502)

BRIEFING

Narsai (sometimes spelt *Narsay*, *Narseh* or *Narses*; Classical Syriac: ܢܪܣܝ, romanized: *Narsay*, name derived from Pahlavi *Narsēh* from Avestan *Nairyō.saŋhō*, meaning 'potent utterance'; c. 399 – c. 502) was one of the foremost of the poet-theologians of the early Church of the East, perhaps equal in stature to Jacob of Serugh, both second only to Ephrem the Syrian. He is venerated as a saint in all the modern descendants of the Church of the East; the Chaldean Catholic Church, Assyrian Church of the East, Ancient Church of the East, and Syro-Malabar Catholic Church. Saint Narsai is known as the 'Flute of the Holy Spirit.'

Although many of his works seem to have been lost, around eighty of his *mēmrē* (ܡܐܡܪܐ), or verse homilies are extant.

LIFE

Narsai was born at ‘Ain Dulba (ܥܝܢ ܕܘܠܒܐ "Plane Tree Spring") in the district of Ma‘alləta (ܡܥܠܠܬܐ) in the Sasanian Empire (now in Duhok Governorate, Iraq). Being orphaned at an early age, he was raised by his uncle, who was head of the monastery of Kfar Mari (ܟܦܪ ܡܪܝ ܕܒܝܬ ܙܒܕܝ) near Beth Zabdai (ܒܝܬ ܙܒܕܝ). Narsai spent ten years as a student at the School of Edessa and later returned there to teach (*c.* 437), eventually becoming head of the school. Perhaps in 471, Narsai left Edessa after disagreeing with the city's bishop Cyrus (471–498). With the help of his friend Barsauma, who was bishop of Nisibis (although Narsai and Barsauma's wife do not seem to have seen eye-to-eye), Narsai re-established the School of Nisibis. When his former school was ordered closed by Byzantine emperor Zeno in 489, it seems that many of his faithful staff and students came to join Narsai in Nisibis. Evidence from the first *Statutes of the School of Nisibis*, drafted in 496, shows that Narsai was still alive, and he must have been a venerable old teacher in his nineties. Narsai died sometime early in the sixth century and was buried in Nisibis in a church that was later named after him. Joseph Huzaya was one of his pupils.

Narsai's extant works belong to the distinctive Syriac literary genre of the *mēmrā*, or homily in verse. He employs two different metres — one with couplets of seven syllables per line, the other with twelve. The mêmrê were designed to be recited in church or religious school, each an exposition of a particular theme. The later Syriac writer Abdisho bar Berika of Nisibis suggests that Narsai wrote 360 mēmrē in twelve volumes along with prose commentaries on large sections of the Old Testament and a book entitled *On the Corruption of Morals*. However, only eighty mēmrē remain, and none of his prose works.

HOMILIES

Hundreds of works have been attributed to Narsai, but only just over 80 of his homilies (*mēmrē*) have survived. Some surviving sogitha are also attributed to Narsai, but they are considered spurious. The homilies are all poetry, and most use 12-syllable metre, with a minority using 7-syllable meter. Most, if not all, of Narsai's homilies involve biblical exegesis across liturgical, moral, and theological subjects.

In 1905, Alphonse Mingana published a two-volume work with the Syriac text of 47 of these homilies. In 1970, a photographic reproduction of a manuscript with 72 of Narsai's homilies was published by *Patriarchal Press*. Two numbering systems are used for Narsai's homilies: one by Mingana, and a second by Macomber, in his 1970 inventory of Narsai's manuscripts.

LIST OF NARSAI’S HOMILIES

Name	Number (Macomber)	Number (Mingana)	Translations	Additional notes
On Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets (I)	1	1	English	
On Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets (II)	2	2		
On Revelations to Abraham	3	3	English	
On the Nativity	4	-	English	
On Mary (On the Incarnation)	5	-	English	
On Epiphany	6	-	English	
On John the Baptist	7	-	English	
On Peter and Paul	8	4	English German	

Name	Number (Macomber)	Number (Mingana)	Translations	Additional notes
On the Four Evangelists	9	-		
On Stephen	10	5	English	
On the Three Doctors	11	-	French	
On the Iniquity of the World	12	6	English	
On Supplication (On Prayer)	13	7	English	
On Jonah	14	8	English	
On Reproof	15	9		
On Human Nature	16	16	English	
For Any Saints Day	17	-		
On the Departed and the Resurrection	18	-	French	
On Works	19	-		
On Lent I	20	10		
On the Temptation of Christ (1)	21	-	English	
On the Temptation of Christ (2)	22	-		
On Lent III	23	11		
On Lent IV	24	12		
On Reproof	25	13		
On Lent V	26	14		
On the Parable of the Ten Virgins	27	15	French	
On the Raising of Lazarus	28	-		
On Palm Sunday (1)	29	-		
On Palm Sunday (2)	30	-		
Against the Jews	31	18	Italian	
On the Canaanite Women	32	-	English	
On the Prodigal Son	33	-	French	
On Holy Week	34	19		
On the Mysteries	35	17	English French	Probable forgery
On the Passion	36	-	McLeod	
On the Repentant Thief	37	20	English	
On Mysteries and Baptism	38	21	English French	
On Baptism	39	22	English French	
On the Resurrection	40	-	McLeod	
On the Confessors	41	24		
On the Martyrs (1)	42	25		
On the Martyrs (2)	43	-		Probable forgery
On New Sunday (On the New Creation)	44	26	English	
On the Ascension	45	-	McLeod	
On Pentecost	46	27		
On the Workers in the Vineyard	47	28	French	
On the Rich Man and Lazarus	48	28	French	
On Creation IV (On the Forming of Adam and Eve)	49	29	English French	
On Humility	50	-		

Name	Number (Macomber)	Number (Mingana)	Translations	Additional notes
On the Antichrist	51	23		
On the Second Coming	52	23	French	
On the Wheat and the Tares	53	-	French	
On the Finding of the Cross	54	30		
On the Bronze Serpent	55	-	English	
On the Dedication of the Church	56	-		
On the Tabernacle	57	-	English	
On Isaiah's Vision	58	31	English	
On the Church and the Priesthood	59	32	English	
On the Dedication of the Church	60	33	English German	
On Creation II	61	34	French	
On Creation III	62	35	English French	
On Creation I	63	36	French	
On Creation V	64	37	French	
On Creation VI	65	38	French German	
On the Soul	66	39	German	
On the Blessing of Noah	67	-	English	
On the Tower of Babel	68	-	English	
On Job	69	40		
On Joseph	70	41		
On the Flood	71	-	English	
On the Miracles of Moses	72	42		
On Samson	73	43		
On David and Saul	74	-		
On Solomon	75	-		
On Enoch and Elijah	76	-	English	
On the Three Children	77	44		
On Reproof of the Clergy	78	45		
On Reproof	79	46		
On Reproof of Women	80	47	English	
On John 1:14 (On Christology)	81	-	English	
On the Feast of the Victorious Cross	82			
(Title Unknown)	83			
(Title Unknown)	84			

SYRIAC EDITIONS

Major collection of Narsai's works, containing the full text of 47 memre and the incipits of 34 more — Mingana, Alphonse (1905). *Narsai Doctoris Syri Homiliæ et Carmina* (in Syriac and Latin). Mosul.

PUBLISHED TRANSLATIONS

English

- Butts, Aaron; Heal, Kristian; Kitchen, Robert, eds. (2024). *Narsai: The Homilies: Volume 1*. Peeters.

- Connolly, Dom R.H. (1909). *The liturgical homilies of Narsai*. Cambridge University Press.

- Four mēmrē on baptism and eucharist

- Frishman, Judith (1992). *The ways and means of the divine economy : an edition, translation and study of six biblical homilies by Narsai* (PhD thesis). Leiden University.

- Harrak, Amir (2018). *Mar Narsai: Homily 33 on the Sanctification of the Church*. Gorgias Press.

- Kuzhuppil, Thomas (2006). *The Vision of the Prophet Isaiah: A Theological Study of Narsai's Interpretation of Isaiah 6*. Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum.

- McLeod, Frederick G., ed. (1979). *Narsai's metrical homilies on the Nativity, Epiphany, Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension: critical edition of Syrica text*. François Graffin. Turnhout: Brepols.

- Five mēmrē on dominical feasts — Christmas, Epiphany, Passion of Jesus, Easter, and Ascension of Jesus — these show Narsai's christological opposition to Cyril of Alexandria in a few places

- Molenberg, Corrie (1993). "Narsai's Memra on the Reproof of Eve's Daughters and the 'Tricks and Devices' they Perform". *Le Muséon*. **106** (1–2): 65–87.

- Walters, J. Edward (2021). *Eastern Christianity: A Reader.* Eerdmans.

- Younan, Andrew, ed. (2024). *Narsai: Selected Sermons*. Paulist Press.

French

- Brouwers (1965). "Premier poème de Narsaï sur le Baptême". *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph*. **41**: 177–207.

- Delly, E. (1959). "Le 23e 'Memra' de Narsai". *Divinitas*. **3**: 514–553.

- Frishmann, J., ed. (1992). *Narsai's Memre on Old testament Topics*. University of Leiden (dissertation).

- Six mēmrē on Old Testament topics —on Enoch and Elijah, the Genesis flood narrative, Blessings of Noah, the Tower of Babel, the Tabernacle, and the Nehushtan

- Martin, F (1900). "Homélie de Narsaï sur les trois Docteurs". *Journal Asiatique*. **15**: 469–525. Archived from the original on December 21, 2006.

- Memra on the Three Doctors (Diodorus of Tarsus, Nestorius, and Theodore of Mopsuestia)

- Guillaumont, Antoine (1956). "Poème de Narsaï sur le baptême". *L'Orient Syrian*. **1** (2): 189–207.

- Gignoux, Philippe, ed. (1968). *Homélies de Narsaï sur la création: Édition critique du texte syriaque*. Patrologia Orientalis 34, fasc. 3–4 (in French). Turnhout/Paris: Brepols.

- Six mēmrē on creation

- Gignoux, Philippe (1962). "Homélie de Narsai sur la création d'Adam et d'Eve et sur la transgression du commandement". *L'Orient Syrian*. **7**: 307–336.

- Gignoux, Philippe (1962b). "Homélie de Narsai sur la création du monde". *L'Orient Syrian*. **7**: 477–506.

- Gignoux, Philippe (1963). "Sur les mystères de l'église et sur le baptême". In Hamman, A. (ed.). *L'Initiation chrétienne*. Bernard Grasset. pp. 195–213.

- Gignoux, Philippe (1963b). "Sur l'exposition des mystères". In Hamman, A. (ed.). *L'Initiation chrétienne*. Bernard Grasset. pp. 214–247.

- Gignoux, Philippe (1963c). "Homélie de Narsai sur le mot 'au commencement' et sur l'Essence divine". *L'Orient Syrian*. **8**: 227–250.

- Gignoux, Philippe (1966). "Les doctrines eschatologiques de Narsai". *L'Orient Syrian*. **11**: 321–352, 461–488.

- Gignoux, Philippe (1967). "Les doctrines eschatologiques de Narsai". *L'Orient Syrian*. **12**: 23–54.
- Kruger, Paul (1958). "Traduction et commentaire de l'homélie de Narsaï sur les martyrs. Contribution à l'étude du culte des martyrs dans le nestorianisme primitif". *L'Orient Syrien*. **3**: 299–316.

- Siman, Emmanuel Pataq, ed. (1984). *Cinq homélies sur les paraboles évangéliques* (in French). Paris: Cariscript.

- Five mēmrē on Parables of Jesus — of the Ten Virgins, of the Prodigal Son, of the rich man and Lazarus, of the Workers in the Vineyard, and of the Tares

German

- Allgeier, Arthur (1917). "Der König und die Königin des 44. (45.) Psalmes im Lichte des N. Test. und der altchristlichen Auslegung. Ein Beitrag zur Begriffsgeschichte der Sponsa Christi". *Der Katholik*. **19** (3): 145–173.

- Allgeier, Arthur (1922). "Ein syrischer Memrâ über die Seele religionsgeschichtlichem Rahmen". *Archiv fiir Religionswissenschaft*. **21**: 360–396.

- Kruger, Paul (1952). "Die älteste syrisch-nestorianische Dokument über die Engel". *Ostkirchliche Studien*. **1**: 283–296.

- Kruger, Paul (1958b). "Ein Missionsdokument aus frühchristlicher Zeit. Deutung und Übersetzung des Sermo de memoria Petri et Pauli des Narsai". *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religions wissenschaft*. **42**: 271–291.

Italian

- Mingana, Paul T. (2003). *E saranno benedetti nel tuo seme tutti i popoli della terra : uno studio di Pshitta Gn 22, 15-18nell'esegesi di Mar Narsai, tesi di laurea in Teologia Biblica / Paul T. Mingana*. Pontificia Universitas Urbaniana.